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Finding a Counter Story at an Inclusive, Adapted, Sport and Adventurous Training
Course for Injured, Sick and Wounded Soldiers: Drawn In-Drawn Out

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Abstract

Over the past two years we have been members of a Leeds Beckett University research team evaluating an inclusive adapted multi-activity sport and adventurous training course for injured, sick and wounded soldiers. For the most part the course has been successful in its aims with many soldiers reporting profound changes to their mental and physical health, future hopes and motivation. Yet, there have been a small number of soldiers who do not appear to benefit from the course, at least in the ways it was originally hoped: Luke was one such soldier. This performance ethnography sheds light on why, at times, sport and physical activity interventions may fail to meet the needs of some military personnel and how a counter story might come to be valued within a competitive, sport setting.

Key words: Performance ethnography, sport, adventurous training, injured, sick and wounded soldiers, recovery, war veterans, public engagement, counter story, war

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Deciding what to do about what we know can be ethically and morally taxing, as Arthur Frank (2000, p.636) put it, ‘more knowledge only increases the density of ethical dilemmas’. Among the ethical dilemmas seeking resolution in the aftermath of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are; how should we support injured, sick and wounded military personnel as they transition out of the military and back into civilian life and what are the consequences if we fail?

There is arguably more information available to us now as we contemplate these types of questions compared with any other point in history. Research has illuminated how the types of physical and psychological injuries typically incurred by war veterans can lead to a loss self and identity, and for some a loss of hope. Research has also revealed that post war traumas don’t just solely trouble the individual soldier but can impact his or her partner, family and community while suicide rates among combat veterans provide a sign that we are perhaps getting something wrong (see, Fear et al., 2010; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008).

In response, one answer to these complex issues has been for military organisations (often working with charities) to create interventions likely to facilitate recovery and transition into civilian life. Through providing sick, injured and wounded military personnel with opportunities for increasing confidence and motivation and the development of new and/or transferable skills it is possible to create manageable steps from ‘being unwell’ to employment and life outside of the military.

One such intervention, included in The Defense Recovery Capabilityⁱ, is a sport and physical activity intervention known as *Battle Back (Lilleshall)*ⁱⁱ which is a week-long course providing inclusive, adaptive sport and adventurous training. Since its inception the programme has been extremely effective in supporting injured, sick and wounded soldiers along their recovery pathway by, for example, rekindling interest and motivation in sports which many soldiers had thought would be unavailable to them having sustained a life changing injury or impairment (Carless, 2014; Carless et al., 2013, 2014). The impact of the playing sport again and being challenged physically has seen many participants take a new outlook or attitude to life and future possibilities.

A recent systematic review exploring the outcomes of sport and physical activity interventions aimed at combat veterans, conducted by Nick Caddick and Brett Smith (2014) which included research conducted at Battle Back Lilleshall (Carless et al., 2013), showed how activities as diverse as climbing a mountain, a community exercise programme and fly fishing have resulted in improvements to both subjective and psychological well-being and increased motivation for life. While in general there is a lot to celebrate and acknowledge about the potential of sport, community exercise and adventurous activities for supporting the transition and recovery of combat veterans, Caddick and Smith (2014) note,

whereas the majority of studies seemed to uncritically promote sport and/or physical activity as a vehicle for enhancing well-being, it is necessary to guard against viewing such activities as a panacea for improving veterans' lives in general. (p.16)

We mirror these sentiments and feel it important to also consider some of the problematic dimensions of the intervention we have been evaluating. Particularly, we

have become aware of a small but not insignificant number of military personnel who do not appear to benefit from the course, at least in the ways it was originally hoped: Luke was one such soldier. This performance ethnography is intended to be a way we might interrogate some of these complex issues. It draws on ethnographic field research conducted while living alongside participants on the course, sharing meals, travel, free time, and attending the activities. Added to this, over the course of a year, Luke and Kitrina continued their dialogue as Luke received a medical discharge from the army and made the transition into civilian life.

From the first conversations Kitrina had with Luke she attempted to be transparent about the type of role we play as part of a *research team*. It has been important for both of us that participants understand some of the limitations to the ways the information we collect can be used. We have attempted to be transparent about who would have access to our interviews (which other than ourselves was a transcriber we have worked with for a number of years) and those who would have access to manuscripts prior to their publication as part of Leeds Metropolitan University's commitment to those who commission, fund and collaborate on the project (e.g., the Royal British Legion, Ministry of Defence, British Army personnel overseeing the course at Lilleshall, Carnegie Great Outdoors coaches delivering the course). We have also attempted - as much as possible baring in mind conventions of story sharing - to be transparent about our own research interests, struggles, presentation strategies and how soldiers' stories might inform, expand, deepen and/or challenge public portrayals of soldiers' lives and experiences. While interviewing Luke about his life experiences therefore Kitrina described different ways the interviews, observations and field notes might be used, who the inquiry might benefit and the potential of using critical,

creative, politically informed, feminist, communitarian approaches to disseminate the findings. To expand Luke's awareness about some of the potential presentation strategies we might use Kitrina performed examples of some of the poems she had created from research in the past (Douglas, 2012). These were very quick to share but provided examples of how we can embody our research and evoke multiple issues in a powerful emotionally evocative way. She also discussed examples of other creative projects, for example, using songs (Douglas, 2012) a play (Douglas, 2014) and performing (Douglas & Carless, 2006). At different times during these conversations Luke described his aims and aspirations for the research. He also shared his concern that by focussing his energy and time on employment opportunities and improved health it would limit his ability, in the short term, to advocate for others in a similar position.

Performance ethnography, Norman Denzin writes,

is a way of acting on the world in order to change it. Dialogic performances, enacting a performance-centred ethic, provide materials for critical reflection on radical democratic educational practices (Denzin, 2003, p.228).

Deciding to create a performance ethnography was a strategic choice aimed at providing material for critical reflection and to bring about change at the community level. For Luke it was important to draw attention to some of the taboo issues that soldiers struggle with. The choice of performance ethnography therefore made it possible for soldiers' stories to be embodied, witnessed and amplified in a way that the coaches delivering the course, the public, students, family members and civilian

community health practitioners might access as we attempt to respond to the needs of injured, sick and wounded soldiers returning from war and integrating into civilian life and communities.

PROLOGUE

‘Drawn in – Drawn out’ is intended to be a duologue, a two-person play in one act. It can be performed with limited resources, in a variety of contexts and settings.

DRAWN OUT – DRAWN IN

Characters: Luke a soldier, Narrator

Narrator [*From stage left, sings ‘Ray of sunshine’ verse 1*]ⁱⁱⁱ

Tried to tell you
It was raining inside
Pain was rising and my life-boat capsized
Tried to show you
Tide comin’ in but your
Eyes were focussed on your own
Thunder within
Weren’t they?

[Guitar continues six bars, to join in with narrator speaking the words in time to the rhythm of the song]

What makes the grass grow, blood, blood, blood

What is a bayonet for, to kill, Kill, Kill

What makes the grass grow, blood, blood, blood

What is a bayonet for, to kill, Kill, Kill

Luke [Stage centre]

RETALIATE

When you lose friends

You just want to kill

You really do

Your first emotion

Retaliate

The animal envelopes you

Then, you think, *fuck*

How do I get back?

Which way is normal, after this

Living the animal

Acting the animal

Then suddenly, you're back

A family man again

And you go, I can't be, I'm different

So many emotions, it's crazy

You know, I thought

This is a long way from Art College

What the fuck

Narrator

Six months after returning from Afghanistan Luke finds himself at a week-long sport and adventurous training course. It's compulsory for wounded, sick or injured soldiers in the British Army. Day one wasn't the kind of help Luke had in mind.

The course leader begins: '*Choose three cards that represents how you feel at the moment*'. There are many cards he could choose: Forward thinking, optimistic, scared, thoughtful, proud, stubborn, hard working, would like to move forward with life, angry, distrustful, uncertain about the future, broadminded, forward looking, seeking balance, friendly, ashamed, considerate, organised, reserved, joyful, stressed, playful, intelligent, empathic, inquisitive.

Luke

I'll tell you how I feel. I'm angry [he slams a card down on the ground as he says the words] I'm distrustful [Slams another card down on the floor] and I want answers [a third card is thrown to the floor]. What would I like to get out

of the week? Nothing, it's too late, too fuckin' late. I don't want to be here, I need to sort my life out, I need a job, I've a wife and family to support, and you want me to play wheelchair basketball? I hate basketball.

Narrator

For weeks now he's been sat at home
No pride, his trade stripped away
A medal sitting, he doesn't know where
He's in hole, a big deep hole
Doesn't know where he's going,
That's the gist of it

Luke

I didn't want to play basketball so one of the coaches sat out the session, just listened to me. Then a researcher asked, she wanted to interview me 'bout how I got here.

Narrator

Luke's dad was a strict guy, a military man
Military police-*man*

Sunday lunch, Luke reached for a potato

Got a fork in his hand

Yeh his dad was strict,

But also supportive - in a weird way

As Luke got older they got on more

Got quite close, did everything together

Luke

Me Dad had a workshop

I would help out

Change fuel tanks on land rovers

Figure it out

It was 'old school', you know

Men were men and we were engineers

But I was always reserved

Quiet 'n shy

Me dad over powering, that old fashioned way

Speak when you're spoken to - kids were kids –

Don't answer back, that was it, I never did

But I was good at school, got an 'A' in art,

It's a way to express what's locked in your head

Bring it out, let it stand, breath

Obviously with my dad being in the military it was in my family so - I was in the cadets you know and it was something different. Every Friday, this was the good bit, cadets would get the day off school so we used to go flying. The pilots at the airfield were all ancient fighter pilots. This guy who took me up, must have been knocking on 70, he was an old lightening pilot and the first thing he said to me was; '*You've got to land this plane if I have a heart attack!*' Well, we went off, and I didn't really want to do any acrobatics you know, I just wanted a nice flight. But he just did it anyway and we ended up coming strafin' at this farm, tatatatatatatatattata.

So, I was planning on going into the military coz Dad always wanted me to be a military policeman like he was but mum said they're bullies and I just didn't want to do that kind of stuff. I joined in sport at school, but was never, it wasn't my thing,

I always wanted to be a bass player. So I started playing bass and that was it really, just got into music. And my friends - we all wanted to be in a band, and ah... I kind of taught myself to play and it was punk stuff, Fun, Green Day, Blink 42, you know, the kind of people we could relate to. Actually, I've left a big part of my life out of this - I have to go back.

Narrator

Luke's dad had been an alcoholic

But, for a long time there, he'd given up
Suddenly, his dad, this military policeman,
Went back to the drink
And when he got violent, Luke's mum kicked him out
Luke didn't see his dad again till he was 21
Did that pushed him to rebel?
Watching his stable family, kinda - fall apart?

Luke

Our punk band was my escape
And I dropped the idea of becoming a military man
Moved over to Art College
Made a different plan

When I left college I needed to get work and the guy I was in the band with,
he was living off the state, on the dole. So here I was 18-years-old waking-up
with a hangover on his sofa every day going, '*Do I really wanna being doing
this for the rest of my life?*' You know, there's plenty more I can see me doing.

I think a lot of it was my Dad really, you know, prove to my Dad that I could
do these things. 'cause, I didn't really see it. I thought like, I always had
something to prove to him, that I could be better. I didn't know where he was
or what he was doing, I didn't know if he was dead or alive really. So I went
and joined the Army. That was when I was 21.

Narrator

Just before he joined-up
Luke's dad was taken into hospital
Luke went to see him, and he wasn't in a good way
This big ol bloke had
Lost weight, shrunk
Turned yellow, *liver poisoning*, the Dr said
As Luke watched his dad in that hospital bed
He thought, *he's quite pathetic*
Lying there looking beaten in some strange game of life
Two weeks later, Luke had a phone call
His dad was dead, and that was it

Luke

You see,
I didn't think he'd die,
You just don't think it's going to happen,
You think, pissed up again,
You think, they're gonna pull through, he'll be alright

Narrator

That was the week before basic training. And then when Luke was away, all his Dads things, you know rings and stuff

Luke

I don't want possessions, it's not going to bring. I'd rather have my Dad

Narrator

Everything was given away, '*Ah you were away in the army*' the family say

Luke

So in a way I felt like I gave everything to the army

Narrator

And a lot of people said, when Luke came back, '*Fair play to you, you've given the army your all.*'

Luke

I felt like I'd given 110%, I soldiered on in basic training

Narrator

Was he always kind-of
Still playing that game
Trying to prove something?
It's like a game he'll never win
He'll never win, but he still plays
Still he goes

Luke

I'll prove this

I'll prove this

Narrator

He just goes round in circles

Luke

I did that through the army, made sure I was the best at everything. I had to be best in my trade, and I was flyin', top of my class. Got my name down as being a good solid engineer and good armourer, got promoted really quickly, 2 years early to Lance Corporal an' I was flyin'.

Narrator

Everyone was telling him, '*Ah you're flying, future star of the corps.*' Everything, he was going far. Then Luke was deployed, to Afghanistan, on patrol with the infantry.

Luke

Um, things started to kind of affect me out there. I was starting to kind of. I had been going full on through everything and everything started slowing down a bit and you know, things started coming back to me about my dad. And when you go out to a place like that and then when young guys started dying.

Narrator

He started doubting

Doubting himself

Doubted the system

Doubting life

He got really down
Worse and worse
And his wife was pregnant
Another big weight
And he thought
He wondered
Would he be like his dad?
What sort of a dad would he be?

Luke & Narrator

Isolated, trapped
Always tension
In a place that can mess you up
Never know what's going to happen
Never know if it's going to kick off
Is someone going to open fire?
Always on that edge
Always on the edge

Luke

And I one day I just I caught myself, contemplating, you know - just blowing
my head off – and I know everyone has those kind of feelings, '*Wouldn't*

things be easier if? ' But I'd been thinkin' about it for about a good 20 minutes so, fuck, I could tell there's something not right. So I took myself to the Doc. I didn't want to first of all because I know the consequences, especially being an armourer and the kind of work I do.

Narrator

An armourer is the man in the know about weapons
The man who stands behind the gun, standing guard, looking hard
He protects, stands firm
And as a military man
This man is Luke, the star of the corps
But you see, they took his weapon

Luke

Which was obviously quite embarrassing

Narrator

State you're in *you* can't have a weapon
Send him to Bastion, helicopter him in
Keep him on the ward, then, fly him home

Luke

So, I saw some psychologist

Narrator

And it's very hard
To talk, to Colonel John McMaster
About problems
Luke didn't want to lose his job
He's got a family
A new-born son

Luke

He's in uniform with a Colonel rank's and this guy's just going to fire me if I
fuckin' tell him what I really think or what I'm feeling, he's just gonna fire me.

Narrator

He can't relate to a Colonel
That's not who he needs
So it feels like he's the only one
He's on his own

Luke

Am I the only one? There's got to be other people who feel this way, why
can't I talk to them? Why can't I see what they've got instead of putting me in
front of this Colonel who's giving me flashing lights to see what my pupils are
doing.

Narrator

Isolated, embarrassed

People asking questions

So, why aren't you working?

On your holidays are you?

Not still on the sick?

You having a joke?

Then on the news

Two guys had been killed

From his Battalion

Guys he knew well

Guys who *he* was out *there* with

Did all his training with

Luke

Sergeant Mark Fielding and Private Nick Ross,

I'd seen Nick in Basti

He just turned 18

I live with that guilt

I came home and they were killed

And I tried to get back in the saddle, to be working again, but I was feeling more and more isolated really and things were going wrong at home. I started smashing-up the house, arguing with my wife constantly and I tried to say to people, '*you know, look, I'm finding this hard*' but no one did anything, you know. I just kind-of got ignored, no one ever seems to want to know. They don't want to know until you kick your wife across the room, then people notice.

Narrator

Anti-depressants

And a discharge

No pride

No confidence

He's got

Luke

Fuck-all left. You know, I even contemplated, I thought, '*I should have just blown my head off*' because at least I'd go out with my respect, with my dignity intact.

I need. I need people to talk to you know, I need people who've lived through the same situation and have come out on the other side 'cause from where I'm standing there is no other side.

So that's why I didn't really want to come here. Recently, one of my mates hung himself when he got back, right, one of the guys I was out there with: he came back an hung himself hay? And I can understand why people do it you know. I'm gonna tell you this right, I'm gonna be open with you about it, the last few days, I've contemplated it.

Narrator

So here he is at Battle Back

Has anything changed?

Where are the answers? Still angry, enflamed

The wheelchair basketball

The Finalé, last day

A last chance to sit out

or to join in, and to play

And he's walking down with a squad who seem tight

Their animated, excited, eager to fight

Then came a question, what would he do?

Another alternative, out of the blue

'Would you be up drawing?'

The offer was there

And paints, brushes and paper too

On Wednesday, he said,

Luke

I'll think about it.

Narrator

So here he was

Would he draw or wouldn't he?

Could he draw, or couldn't he?

Luke

I said straight, drawing people playing sport is not my thing, but,

Narrator

He turned round and looked at the buildings,

Luke

That, I wouldn't mind drawing,

Narrator

It was gothic imposing
Shadows and light
So we sat out the basketball
Captured the light
Pen finding paper
Black and then white
A wash with some water
First time, not quite right

Luke

I only did it because, she asked
But, once you get the rhythm
You just float
Like going into a stride
Not like playing football
You gotta get into that stride

Once you are in - it just goes
No guidelines, no right or wrong
I'm letting it go
Finding the shadows
Fooling the eye

When you have no motivation it's very hard to kind of do something like this.
You can't *just* go out and find something you wanna do, you know.

At the end of the day
I know what want
I know what I'm doing
I paint for myself, like I
Take pride in my work
Do it again
'til I get it right
That's the way I like to play it

Narrator

You know, he said at the end of the week.

Luke

The biggest thing I actually got this week? It was just being able to talk to someone because it's all well and good the army kind of doing-this-and-doing-that but what I was going through was such a big thing. I just needed someone to talk to. That's all I needed 6 months ago. That's all I needed, but no one ever did that, no one ever just spoke to me about it.

So that's a big thing. And the other thing I got outa coming here, not feeling like you're the only one going through it, through this all. It's weird; it's that simple.

Narrator [Plays four bars of 'Ray of sunshine' and then sings final chorus of the song]

What's a ray of sunshine
Or a beacon of light, to a
Wandering mind who travels by night
Lost and absorbed by the vision they see
And only in dreams will their passion run free

Reflections

A draft script (created almost entirely from Luke's interview transcripts) was developed first as this had been one of the possible representations strategies that Luke and Kitrina discussed. Even so, we had many concerns about how Luke would

respond. We worried that Luke may be offended because too much of his life had been either shown or omitted, or that relationships he described had not been portrayed accurately or sensitively or that the play failed to capture in essence what was important to him. Having read the play Luke began his response to Kitrina (in an e-mail) with the words: 'trust me Kitrina, you haven't offended me at all' (personal communication, 2013). At the time Luke suggested that he was still too unwell to do something like this himself but he valued and encouraged us to use the play as he thought it would challenge stereotypical portrayals of soldiers and their identities and would help inform the public about a variety of taboo issues faced by soldiers. He also recognised the potential for the play to be used as a pedagogical tool in coach education and in the on-going delivery of Battle Back project. At this time he reiterated how important it had been to him that the coaches on the course listened to him without making judgements.

Luke is currently employed and his mental health continues to fluctuate. He continues to share his experiences of transitioning the army and into civilian life while we continue to be interested in his life and share with him our on-going work on the Battle Back project, as well as our mental health research in general. Recently, after watching a short film based on our research with a runner living with a long-term mental health condition 'the long run' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-fprKKUGKo>), Luke wrote:

Great film! I feel very passionately about getting these kind of stories out there. I still feel like mental health is very much a taboo subject, especially within the military. I can no longer sit back and let other people go through the humiliation and pain of it all. It's due to a huge lack of understanding, so

it's time to break down this whole stiff upper lip attitude and start seriously talking about these issues. (Luke personal correspondence, June, 2014)

While the play may be a useful tool to interactively engage the public (which is critical to challenging stereotypical ideas about soldiers) it is 'more than a tool' (Denzin, 2003, p.124). 'Drawn in – Drawn out' overtly resists the monological type of story that dominates in sport and army settings. The dominant narrative in sport is a type of story where we all are storied as being 'naturally' competitive and as 'having to be', because it is *only* winning, winners and being tough that count (See for example, Douglas & Carless, 2015). Given that our identities are never solely our own but develop and respond to available cultural resources and to how those around us allow us to 'be' (Nelson, 2001) the play also provides an example of a counter story. An alternative way of being and storying life where we aren't all interested in competition, where vulnerability isn't negative, and where care and connection are foremost. It is through accessing such alternative stories and having them accepted by people who listen, validate, and value these alternatives, that others like Luke can begin to repair a damaged identity. We hope that 'Drawn in - Drawn out' makes a modest contribution to this aim.

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Notes

ⁱ The Defense Recovery Capability is an Ministry Of Defense led initiative in partnership with *Help for Heroes* and *The Royal British Legion* alongside other Service charities and agencies to ensure that wounded, injured and sick personnel have access to the key services and resources needed to help them either return to duty or make a smooth transition into an appropriately skilled civilian life. <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/can-we-help/military-recovery/defence-recovery-capability> accessed June 15, 2014.

ⁱⁱ The activities at the Battle Back Lilleshall course in 2013 when this field research took place included wheelchair basketball, seated volleyball, archery, shooting, rock climbing, kayaking, indoor bowls and mountain biking. The sessions are delivered by a team of highly qualified (male and female) civilian coaches, many of whom are ex-

military personnel and who take a ‘person-centred’ approach to coaching with an emphasis on personal development, care and support.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ray of Sunshine, © k.douglas (2006) used with permission